

## A Normal Life by Lbilover

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**Summary:**

Joyce has a surprise Christmas present for Jonathan and Will that triggers memories of Bob.

## A Normal Life

### Author's Note:

Originally written for a friend's birthday.

The house is back to normal again, as normal as it will ever be, and the boys have helped her decorate it for Christmas with a loving care that touches her deeply. Nancy had come over, too, to help, and Joyce Byers is so happy, so  *fucking* happy, that Jonathan has found someone. His shy smile, the glow in his eyes whenever he looks at Nancy Wheeler, ease the pain of her own loss that she is feeling so keenly with the holidays.

Bob Newby would have loved celebrating Christmas with her family, Joyce often thinks. He'd have made them listen to every cheesy, sentimental Christmas carol, made them watch every cheesy, sentimental holiday movie, and they'd have enjoyed them all despite themselves. Because Bob had been like that, his infectious enthusiasm impossible to resist.

But he's gone, Bob is gone, and his big heart with him. All that's left are too few memories and too many nightmares and a single drawing on the kitchen wall that Will had done of Bob Newby, Superhero. Oh, Bob would have loved that, too. But to Joyce, Bob wasn't a superhero. He was normalcy and kindness and stability, everything Lonnie hadn't been. And he'd loved her, really loved her, and made her feel not like a struggling divorced mom of two boys, but the most desirable and beautiful woman on earth.

On Christmas morning, Joyce watches from the sofa as Will and Jonathan open their presents by the tree. There are drawing supplies and video games for Will, Kodak film and music cassettes for Jonathan, and the usual necessities such as gloves and hats and sweaters for them both. When they're finished and sitting in a sea of wrapping paper and ribbon, she says, "I have one more present. It's for both of you." She produces a small manila envelope and hands it to Jonathan.

He looks at her in surprise as he takes it. "What's this?"

She smiles. "You'll see. Go ahead and open it."

Jonathan does, with Will staring curiously over his shoulder, and he takes out a glossy brochure and the two boys examine it. "A resort hotel? In Maine?"

"I made a reservation for us in July. I thought it would do us good to get away for a week, just the three of us." Joyce is proud of how steady her voice is. "When's the last time we took a real vacation?"

"Never," Jonathan says wryly. "But why Maine, Mom? And can we afford it?"

"Let me worry about the affording part," Joyce replies, with a dismissive wave of her hand. "As for why Maine..." She shrugs. "I've always wanted to go there. It's supposed to be beautiful, and the hotel is right on the water. You'll be able to take some wonderful photos, Jonathan."

"We can bring Bob's video camera, too," Will says, sounding excited. "Wow, Mom. This is such a cool present. I don't know anyone who's been to Maine. Mike and Dustin and Lucas are gonna be so jealous." He jumps up. "Can I tell them?"

"Of course, sweetheart." Joyce smiles as Will grabs the brochure from his brother and rushes off to his bedroom and his walkie-talkie.

"So what's really behind this, Mom?" Jonathan asks thoughtfully when Will is gone. "You've never mentioned Maine before."

"I don't know what you mean." But she can hear the defensiveness in her voice. She should have known she couldn't fool Jonathan. They've been through too much together.

"Mom." He makes it one long syllable.

Joyce looks down, fiddles with the hem of her overlong sweater. Then she sighs. "Bob's parents are from Maine. He wanted us to buy their house and move there, as a family. He wanted us to leave Hawkins and have a normal life." Her voice breaks. "If only I'd listened to him..."

"Oh Mom." He comes and sits beside her, puts an arm around her. "I'm so sorry. I know you miss him."

"I do. He was a good man, Jonathan. He didn't deserve what happened to him. If he'd never gotten involved with me, he'd still be alive." She'll live with that guilt for the rest of her life.

"I don't think Bob would look at it like that. I don't think he regretted a single thing that happened." Jonathan laughs a little, a rueful laugh. "He was flat out crazy about you, Mom."

Joyce can't help the blush that rises to her cheeks. It's ridiculous, but there it is. She says, "I know you weren't crazy about him, but Bob cared about you boys."

"I was wrong about Bob. I was wrong about a lot of things."

"Oh honey."

They sit in silence for a time, and Joyce thinks about what Jonathan had said. She hopes he's right, that Bob never regretted being involved with her, even at the end. She remembers how Bob had turned and smiled at her, just before...before... She presses her face into Jonathan's shoulder and wills back the tears stinging her eyes.

Jonathan breaks the silence. "Mom, we could still do it. Move, I mean, to someplace far away from Hawkins, and start over. If we like Maine, maybe we can do what Bob wanted and move there."

For a moment Joyce thinks, *Yes, yes, that's what we'll do. Live Bob's dream even if he can't be there to live it with us. Wouldn't it be wonderful to have a normal life?*

But then she thinks about Nancy and the way Jonathan looks at her and how happy he is. She thinks about Will and his friends and what it would mean for him to leave them behind. She thinks about Jane, that strange, extraordinary girl, who needs more guidance than Hopper alone can give her. Finally, she thinks about Hopper. About sneaking cigarettes with him in sixth grade and running away from Mr. Cooper, the two of them, conspirators and rebels, laughing as they ran. About the past year and everything they've been through

and shared, things no one else can possibly understand. About Hop's arm around her outside the gym at the Snow Ball and how it had felt, warm and secure and hinting at a future where grief and loneliness would be a thing of the past.

And she says to her son, "No, honey. Maybe we'll never have a normal life here, but Hawkins is our home."

~end~